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Utah Governor's Sage-grouse Working Group Convened

By Terry Messmer, Utah State University

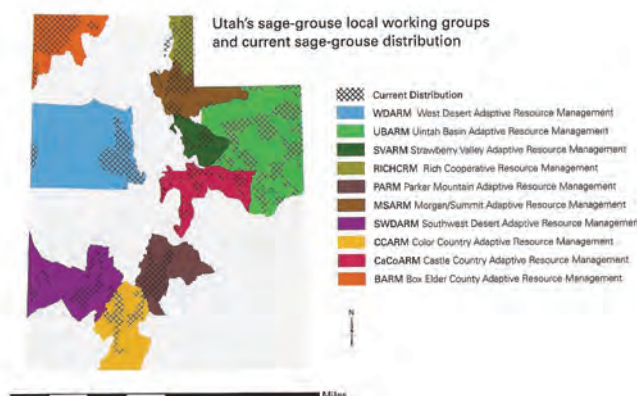
Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*, hereafter sage-grouse) was designated as a candidate species in March 2010 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The USFWS identified the lack of effective regulatory mechanisms to protect the species across the jurisdictional boundaries and habitat loss as the major range-wide sage-grouse conservation threats. Utah Governor Gary R. Herbert subsequently tasked Kathleen Clark, Director of the Utah Public Lands Coordination Office, to convene a working group to identify a Utah solution that in addressing the above factors would avert the need for listing the species. The group has been charged to deliver a set of recommendations to Governor Herbert that would foster thriving sage-grouse populations and allow for balance in the development of Utah's natural resources.

The working group composed of representatives of industry, business, agriculture, elected county officials, the conservation community, academia, and federal, state, and local government agencies held their first meeting on 14 March, 2012. At this meeting the group received their charge and began the discovery process to establish the baseline scientific, environmental, biological, legal, historic, economic facts, and policies surrounding sage-grouse conservation in Utah. Over the course of the next several months, the working group will hear and digest information from formal presentations, testimony, and input received from its members and other stakeholders attending the open meetings. This information will provide the basis of the working group discussion and dialogue which will move them toward developing the recommendations requested by Governor Herbert.

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The process is being facilitated by Mr. Bob Budd, Executive Director, Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust. Mr. Budd served as the facilitator of the working group that developed Wyoming Core Area Plan. When asked to compare where Utah is relative to what was accomplished in Wyoming, Mr. Budd lauded the work of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources for developing the Utah Sage-grouse Strategic Management Plan and the efforts of Utah's 10 local sage-grouse working groups to develop local plans. "These efforts, in combination with the research being done on sage-grouse ecology through Utah State University and Brigham Young University have provided important information the Wyoming effort lacked and have put Utah ahead of the process," he concluded. To date similar working groups have been convened in Nevada and Idaho.



Map courtesy of Todd Black.

NEW SGI BIOLOGIST

By Natasha Gruber, SGI Biologist

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has launched a new effort to help sustain working ranches and conserve greater sage-grouse. This new initiative is called the Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI). The goal of this initiative is to partner with private landowners and Native American tribes to use conservation solutions that benefit grazing lands and sage-grouse by keeping sage-grouse populations healthy to avoid an Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing.

The NRCS has partnered with several conservation organizations to help improve sage-grouse habitat by providing financial and technical assistance to help initiate and implement habitat improvement conservation plans. In Utah our partner is the Mule Deer Foundation (MDF). I have been hired through the NRCS/MDF partnership to assist landowners that would like to implement habitat improvement projects through SGI.

There are a variety of projects that can be implemented through SGI. These projects may include, marking fences to avoid sage-grouse collisions, prescribed grazing, conifer removal, brush management, seeding of forbs and grasses, and easements, to name a few. By participating in these habitat projects and maintaining management practices that benefit sage-grouse, there may be possibilities for some forms of landowner assurances if sage-grouse are listed in the future.

I will be working out of the Roosevelt NRCS office and will be covering the eastern portion of the state. My area will encompass north of the Flaming Gorge Reservoir (to the Wyoming border) to the very southern portions of the state, even covering the Gunnison sage-grouse regions. Please contact me if you are interested in implementing a SGI habitat project or would like more information. I can be reached by mail at NRCS/MDF, 240 W Highway 40, Roosevelt, UT 84066 or by phone at 435-722-4621 ext 115 (office), 435- 621-6891 (cell), or 435-722-9065 (fax).



Photos courtesy of Natasha Gruber

VOLUNTEERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

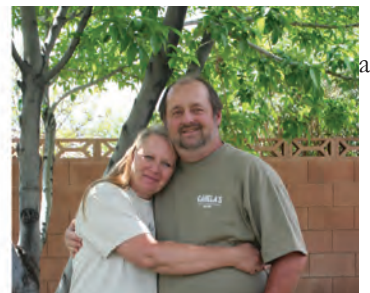
By Heather Hedden McPherron, M.S. Student in Wildlife Biology, Utah State University

Ask anyone who has attempted to catch and radio-collar sage-grouse what March and April are all about and they will most likely tell you little sleep. And nowhere does this ring more true than in Hamlin Valley, Utah, where I would equate finding grouse much to finding a needle in a haystack. Located an hour and a half from the nearest gas station, grocery store, or semblance of a town, I thought help would be hard to come by. That's until I received an email from a couple of residents asking if they could volunteer to help with sage-grouse in any way possible.

That couple is Doug and Carol Ann Schmutz, who have called Hamlin Valley their home for eight years. Waking up at 5 AM for weeks on end, they have put countless hours in to helping me with my research project. With their assistance, I caught almost seven times more birds this year than last. Not only that, they graciously welcomed me into their home where they took me in like I was one of their own. I don't know too many people that would do that for someone they've only known for short few months. They went above and beyond anything that was asked of them and always did it with a smile and a love for the birds. With their help, we will be getting an enormous amount of data on the movements and habitat use by the population of sage-grouse in Hamlin Valley. They will also be helping with telemetry through the summer and a study on raptor/corvid use of fences within sage-grouse habitat.



Photos courtesy of Heather McPherron.



WHATS “STRUT” GOT TO DO WITH SAGE-GROUSE?

By Todd Black, Utah State University

It's that time of year again! The sage-grouse 'strut'. I've been doing sage-grouse research now since 1998 and I still love it and can't wait for this time of year. Watching, listening, and observing sage-grouse behavior on the 'lek' never leaves me with a dull moment. Recently I was asked by someone how many leks I have been to and how many birds I have trapped. I started going through my field journals and by my count, I have observed 133 different leks in 21 different counties across four states (Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, and Utah). I consider myself lucky and privileged to be able to see so many birds in so many different places across sage-grouse range during my career.

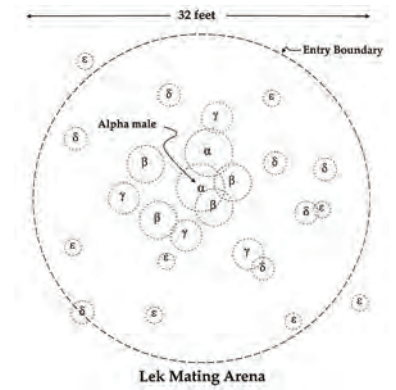
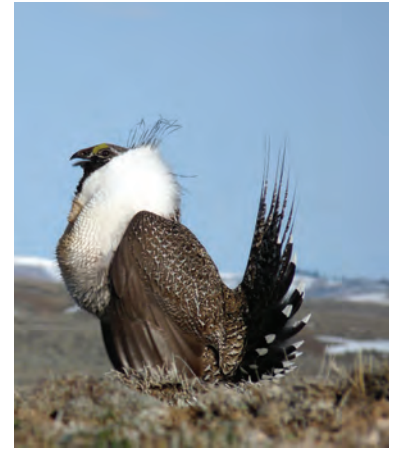
While it is always fun for me to watch, take pictures, and generally be there in the early mornings of March and April. To a sage-grouse (particularly the males), this is serious business and equally important to talk about from the perspective of sage-grouse evolution and biology.

Just what is a 'lek' (pronounced lék)? The word lek comes from the Swedes and means to play or a playing/gathering place. In avian terms, it is the place where the males come to play, establish dominance, display, and ultimately, breed/copulate with the females. This is what it is all about. While watching the lek, it's also common to see other sub dominant males further and further outside of this lek circle (see diagram) and often these non-dominant males will form satellite leks, but these are not likely to be visited by many hens. Research and DNA analysis has shown that generally a few dominant males will do the bulk of the mating. In Utah, you typically see a dozen or more males congregated in a fairly small area (10-20 m, see diagram) where the bulk of the mating activity occurs. Often more than a dozen hens congregate around one male and listen to his 'popping' sound, adore his bright colored air sacks and yellow eye cone, and stare in awe at his long flowing philoplumes, and generally just fall head over heels about his "maleness." Once a hen has mated with the male, she may return frequently (once a morning or every other morning) to remate with the male. She may do this several times over the next week or two. Also during this time, she will be seeking a nest site and will lay a one or two eggs a day over the next week or so. Once she has laid all her eggs (typically 6-8) she will begin incubating and about 26 days later, if the chicks hatch, she will begin a season long odyssey teaching them how to survive.

If you have not been to a lek or observed the sage-grouse strut, now is the time. We would love to have you join us. We have listed several lek viewing opportunities across the state (some have already taken place). Come join us if you can.

Lek viewing opportunities:

April 13	Hennifer Divide Morgan County (contact Todd Black 435-770-9302)
April 16	Parker Mountain (contact Jim Lamb 435-691-2073)
April 18	Warm Springs West Box Elder County (contact Todd Black 435-770-9302)
April 21	Carbon County/Emma Park (contact Brad Crompton 435-820-8921)



Lek mating arena, modeled on the sage grouse, in which each male, alpha-male (highest ranking), beta-male, gamma-male, etc., guards a territory of a few yards in size on average, and in which the dominant males may each attract up to eight or more females. In addition, each individual is shown with variations in personal space (bubbles), whereby higher-ranking individuals have larger personal space bubbles. Common bird leks typically have 15–20 individuals. (Courtesy Wikipedia)



If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.

Where to Start?

There is a new resource available for anyone interested in conservation and wildlife issues on private lands in Utah. The document, called *Conservation Programs for Private Lands: Programs and Resources Available in Utah for Implementation of Utah's Wildlife Action Plan*, provides similar information on the wide variety of opportunities for conservation and wildlife efforts on private lands here in Utah. This includes planning and technical assistance programs, easements, land trusts, financial incentives for landowners, youth corps, federal policy mechanisms, and others. Federal, state, local, and private organizations are represented. For anyone unfamiliar with the many types of opportunities available, section summaries explain the basic concepts behind certain types of programs. The introductory pages organize the programs in different ways, as well as providing starter questions for landowners and wildlife or habitat managers as they consider what programs best fit a given situation. The document is available as a pdf at www.utahcbcp.org. There is a link on the front page (below the sage-grouse).

KID'S CORNER

In this edition of *The Communicator*, we have included some information for kids and plan to have more articles for younger readers in the future. This is a page from a coloring book called "*Seriously Sage-grouse*" produced by the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency. The entire eight-page activity book can be accessed at www.utahcbcp.org on the front page near the bottom.

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.

www.utahcbcp.org

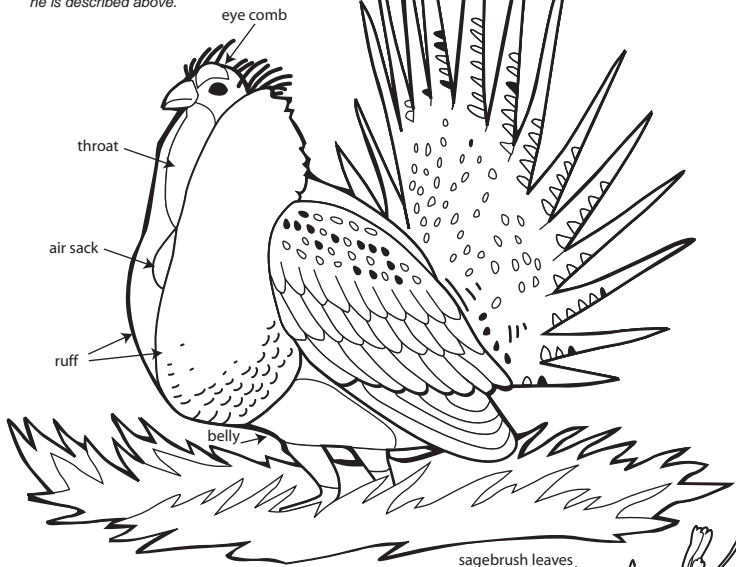
USDA

Seriously Sage-Grouse

What Do They Look Like?

Females are mottled brown, black, and white. Males are larger and, in spring, they have a large white ruff around their necks, a yellow eye comb, and bright yellow air sacks on their breasts, which they inflate to show off to females. Males have a black throat. The feathers on the back, wings, and tail are mostly brown, with some white and black spots. Both sexes have black bellies outlined with white.

This male sage-grouse is showing off to a female. Color him in so he looks the way he is described above.

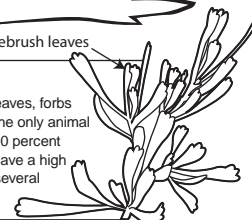


How big do they grow?

The greater sage-grouse is a large, round-winged, ground-dwelling bird. It can grow up to 30 inches long and two feet tall, weighing from 2 1/2 to 7 pounds. It has a long, pointed tail with legs feathered to the base of the toes.

What do they eat?

Sage-grouse eat sagebrush leaves, forbs (wildflowers) and insects. It's the only animal that, in winter, can live on a 100 percent sagebrush diet. Chicks must have a high quality insect diet for the first several weeks after hatching.



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